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ABSTRACT

One of the most important elements of the community college is the open enrollment policy, providing students who may have performed poorly in high school with a fresh start. Serving academically underprepared students is an important objective of community colleges, but the practice is not without pitfalls. Negative outcomes of the open enrollment policy include: (1) enrichment courses offered for credit are being used in place of academic courses, resulting in increased retention and student satisfaction, but not in mastery of academic skills; (2) some students enroll primarily to collect unemployment benefits, attracting students with financial problems and/or a lack of direction who never complete their academic programs; (3) an academically-underdeveloped student base may result in a "watering down" of instruction which can later result in transfer shock; (4) secondary schools expect community colleges to assume too much responsibility for teaching academic fundamentals, while student skills are at an all-time low despite higher high school grade point averages; (5) underprepared students mean extended orientation courses of larger size, shorter durations, with less faculty training; and (6) the open door policy is severely threatened by federal and state funding cuts. Rather than abolishing the open-door system, colleges should take steps to address these issues, including improving communication with secondary schools to help them meet college scholastic requirements, seeking new sources of revenue, and controlling enrollment in enrichment and learning skills courses. (Contains 31 references.) (KP)

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THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE OPEN-DOOR PHILOSOPHY: WHAT NEGATIVE OUTCOMES HAVE DEVELOPED?

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I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the two-year college, or the community college, has become a mainstay in American society. The community college has become an accepted and revered institution in our culture, because it is consistent with the American philosophy that everyone should be given the opportunity to succeed, or at least, the opportunity to fail. The main attractiveness of the community college is the open-enrollment philosophy. An academic institution that practices the philosophy of open enrollment allows students to be accepted into its institution without specific academic prerequisites. This liberal concept allows students who may have performed poorly in high school to take advantage of the "fresh start" that community colleges offer. Serving academically underprepared students is an important objective of the community college system (Marshak, 1981).

This apparently sound philosophy is not without its pitfalls. Many problems have arisen that are unique to the community college format and philosophy. Predicaments such as initial student unpreparedness, high attrition rates, and transfer shock are occurrences that are highly common among community college students. Many educators believe that it is time to re-examine the concept of the community college (Richardson, 1983), because there is a conflict between the

goals of the community college and the institution's actual results. This conflict is a problem that cannot be ignored by leaders of American higher education.

Therefore, this paper examines the conflict between the original goals of the community college system and some of the actual problems that are now inherent to this system. First, a background of the community college system will be examined along with the philosophical intentions of this institution. Next, various problems that have ensued to cause conflict with the desired goals of community colleges will be explored. Later, the conflict issue will be discussed; and finally, some suggestions to improve the community college system will be offered.

II. BACKGROUND AND THE MISSION OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES

The community college evolved to serve students who normally would not have the opportunity to matriculate in a four-year college or university. The first person to promote the idea of the two-year college as important to the well-being of our nation was Jesse P. Bogue, who served as Executive Director of the American Association of Junior Colleges from 1946-1958. Bogue stated that the role of the Junior College could play an important part in promoting and in preserving American democracy (Vaughan, 1986). This belief had validity, because the Junior College provided opportunities for students unable, due either to cost or to academic background, to attend a four-year institution of higher learning. Today, this philosophy still is important in our society, since approximately 60% of American high school graduates do not initially pursue the baccalaureate degree (Vaughan, 1986).

Later, the term "Community College" became the nomenclature to represent two-year accredited colleges of higher learning. Both Bogue and Edmund J. Gleazer, who succeeded Bogue as Executive Director, believed that lifelong community-based education was necessary to give all Americans a chance to succeed (Parnell, 1985). This concept advocated that the community college was to be an extension of the learning process, and that a high school/community

college connection must exist. Eventually, due to the great haste to separate themselves from high schools, too many community colleges have weakened or nearly severed the high school/community college connection (Parnell, 1985).

The original convictions of Bogue became increasingly important during the 1960's when there was an increase in the consciousness for human rights. This increase in consciousness resulted in an increase in enrollment. Many of these students were non-traditional students, and students who were academically underprepared for post-secondary study (Richardson, 1983).

Due to general population increases and aggressive pursuits by community colleges, enrollment has risen significantly. For the past two decades, community colleges have pursued enrollment increases on both pragmatic grounds and philosophic grounds. Pragmatically, more students have meant increased community college size and importance, as well as the acquisition of additional resources to offset the impact of inflation and to underwrite the costs of program expansion. Philosophically, the greater numbers have been cited as evidence of success in achieving improved access to higher education for the entire population (Richardson, 1983).

With the increase in the population attending community colleges, two direct effects occurred. First, as student demand or public policy permitted, four-year colleges and

universities transferred responsibility for the underprepared to the community college (Cross, 1977). Initially, many community colleges "attended" to this responsibility by admitting everyone, according to open-enrollment, but then "flunking out" half of each year's entering class. This was especially prevalent in urban areas such as St. Louis (Moore, 1970).

A second result of the increase in community college enrollment was a shift in emphasis from academics to lifelong learning. This change occurred because it was realized by the community colleges that they were not substantially improving the academic achievement of its students. For the underprepared students, the focus changed from attempting to remedy academic skills to improving students' self-concepts (Roueche and Snow, 1977). This resulted in an emergence of courses such as Horticulture and Art Appreciation.

The first effect should allow the community college to refocus its emphasis on volume, by focusing on student achievement rather than number of participants (Keppel, 1980). This may, however, conflict with the general policy of open enrollment. Critics of those who "flunk out" community college students, after their first semester, can say that one semester is not enough chance for a student to succeed. These critics feel that open-enrollment colleges should allow students to improve themselves over a period of

time longer than one semester. This will result in a continued high volume of community college students (Fralick, 1993).

The second effect also will result in maintaining a high enrollment in community colleges, while adding something to the overall philosophy of the institution. The original philosophy of the community college was to allow all Americans an opportunity for post-secondary education, therefore enabling everyone the opportunity to succeed. In addition, the second effect allows people to take courses that place emphasis on personal enrichment, rather than on academic fortification or career enhancement. This effect provides a service that many four-year colleges and universities do not offer. This added objective may, however, add stress to the growing tension between mission aspirations and available resources (Richardson and Leslie, 1980).

Both the open-admission policy employed and the offering of non-academic courses result in community colleges becoming attractive venues for non-traditional students. Non-traditional students can be defined as adults, age 25 or older, who return to school (Holtzclaw, 1988). These students may be attending school full-time, but are more likely to be attending school part-time while still working (Seidi and Santer, 1990). The population of college students and prospective students shows trends

toward more non-traditional students. Due to this trend, the importance of the community college in the 1990's remains high (Muse, Teal, Williamson, and Fowler, 1994).

So, it may be said that community colleges were, at least in part, designed to fill the educational void between secondary schools and the well-established four-year colleges and universities. That is, the main purpose of the community college is to provide the opportunity for post-secondary education for all interested Americans. This mission, consistent with the philosophy of Horatio Alger, allows everyone the chance to succeed if one works hard enough. In addition to accommodating graduating high school students who are academically unable to be accepted at four-year universities, community colleges have evolved to provide a forum of higher learning for non-traditional students. These two purposes definitely fulfill obligations that the American public holds in great regard (Wilson, 1982).

However, the open-door mission philosophy of the community college has resulted in particular pitfalls or negative outcomes that were not intended by the founders of these institutions. Many of these pitfalls give the community college system implied purposes and images that are not considered positive in today's society. In fact, many difficulties that are present in the community college system conflict with Bogue's design of preserving the well-

being of the nation. The next section of this paper will identify these pitfalls, and it will also discuss how these negative outcomes have caused conflicts that have tarnished the original idealistic philosophical goals of the community college.

III. OPEN ENROLLMENT NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

When community colleges originated, their primary mission was to provide a post-secondary education for academically-underprepared students. The open-enrollment philosophy that is prevalent in community colleges has resulted in a number of negative outcomes that were not intended by the founders of this academic genre.

First, most community colleges, in addition to offering courses in the area of academics, offer courses that can be considered as life enriching. These courses originally were intended for non-traditional students who may elect to take enrichment courses on a part-time basis (Cross, 1977). However, since many of these enrichment courses gradually were offered for academic credit, traditional matriculating students began taking these courses, often in place of traditional academic courses.

Because these special offerings emphasize self-concept and can be taken by those who may be deficient in academic skill areas, these courses may increase and promote student retention and student satisfaction. However, success in these course offerings does not result in mastery of the academic skills necessary for achievement in standard degree programs (Richardson, 1983). Therefore, although these students may be enriching their lives, these courses are not improving the students' academic skills--a necessity for

many community college students.

A second negative outcome evolving from the open-door mission philosophy is that many students enter community colleges for ulterior reasons. For example, many states, including New York State, allow students to collect unemployment benefits while attending college. On the positive side, for many people, this is an excellent opportunity to enhance one's career skills, or to learn new career skills, after one has been displaced out of the job market. Many students utilize these benefits in order to improve themselves, so this program often is successful.

However, this program attracts many students who have financial problems or have a lack of direction (Fryer and Turner, 1990). Some of these students enroll in community colleges just to collect their benefits without the pressure of looking for employment. Many of these students never complete their academic programs, and even fewer students transfer to a four-year college or university (Boss, 1985).

A third negative outcome resulting from the open-door policy is that the "watered down" instruction that may result from an academically-underdeveloped student base results in "transfer shock" for many students (Graham and Dallam, 1986). Transfer shock is a decrease in grade-point averages for community college students during the first or second semester after transferring to a senior institution (Hughes and Graham, 1992). This problem is a concern both

for community colleges and for four-year colleges and universities (Thornton, 1972).

In a study performed by Patricia Diaz, it was found that 79% of community college transfer students experienced transfer shock after transferring to a four-year college (Diaz, 1992). The majority of these students felt that their experience as community college students did not prepare them thoroughly for the demands of a four-year institution. Inadequate instruction and a lack of challenge in their community college courses often were cited by these students as problems occurring in community colleges (Diaz, 1992).

The lack of challenge in their community college courses can be attributed to the instructors teaching to the level of the students--a level that is often inferior to that of four-year college students. Due to this problem, the traditional open-access policy of the community college has often led administrators at senior institutions to view community college transfer students as risk factors (Hills, 1965).

Since some community college students lack the academic skills necessary to succeed in a post-secondary setting, these students need additional guidance. Self-confidence in their academic skills often is quite low. As a result of this low self-confidence, many people who investigate the possibility of enrolling in community college never enroll,

because they lack self-confidence. In many cases, students enroll for courses and never attend a class (Ross, Cosner, and Freitag, 1987).

Ross, Costner, and Freitag concluded that among the students who take pre-admission basic skills tests, non-enrolling students have significantly lower scores, leading the authors to conclude that poor academic preparation was a very important reason for non-enrollment (Ross, Cosner, and Freitag, 1987). After taking these tests, some students may enroll but drop their courses before the semester begins. Other students may decide not to register at all.

This fourth negative outcome is clearly in conflict with the mission of the community college system. In fact, a sample of college professors found it desirable that these students dropped out before beginning class. David Almeida quotes a particular community college professor stating that if these students did enroll, the only thing that the professors could do is to babysit them (Almeida, 1991). Certainly, if the community college system wishes to pursue its goal of providing all interested Americans the opportunity for a post-secondary education and subsequently a chance to succeed, these institutions must do something to assist these students, through early detection of academic difficulties and through increased remediation course offerings.

In addition to student dropout before the initial

academic semester, it is common for community colleges to experience a dropout rate of 60% from one semester to the next semester (Levitz and Noel, 1991). The high dropout rate occurs due to two reasons. First, with the open enrollment policy, students are admitted who lack sufficient academic skills, and finally, many students in community colleges lacked the commitment and lacked clear academic goals and career goals (Fralick, 1993). This problem is consistent with many of the other pitfalls mentioned in this study.

A fifth negative outcome resulting from the open-door policy of community colleges is that this policy has encouraged some secondary schools to expect community colleges to assume too much responsibility for the teaching of academic fundamentals. Students today are leaving high school no better prepared, and in many cases less prepared, than they were in the mid 1960's. In fact, evidence indicates that despite higher grade point averages in high school, students' skills and competencies are at the lowest levels in American history (Roueche and Roueche, 1993). A reason for this problem is due to a shift in teaching responsibility. Today's public schools are producing fewer students that have the academic skills and discipline to succeed at the college level (Kozol, 1991). Often these students enroll at community colleges where they expect to acquire the academic tools necessary for future college

study.

The realities of the faltering public education system has left the community college "between a rock and a hard place" (Roueche and Roueche, 1993). The open-door philosophy requires the community college to admit all interested candidates, but many of these students possess inferior academic skills. Certainly, this dilemma is going to result in a lower standard of education for the community college student, resulting in the "transfer shock" previously mentioned.

This negative outcome leads to the sixth pitfall; namely, the necessity for community colleges to offer extended orientation courses. Orientation courses, in itself, are positive teaching tools, since research has shown a strong relationship between participation in extended orientation courses and enhanced academic performance (Wilkie and Kuckuck, 1989). However there is often less funding for community colleges than at four-year schools. This results in community college orientation courses having significantly larger class sizes, having shorter durations, using less faculty training, and using less varied contact. In addition, these orientation courses are less likely to be required in a community college setting than in a four-year college setting (Rice and Devore, 1992).

Since open-enrollment allows the admission of

academically-disadvantaged students, the need for these programs at community colleges is vital. This belief is reinforced by the fact that the strong correlation between participation in extended orientation programs and student academic performance has been established at two-year schools (Jones, 1986). These programs are vital, but are often expensive. Since many community colleges are under financial constraint (Rice and Devore, 1992), these programs are not always as extensive as they should be.

Finally, community colleges are generously funded by state and by federal grants. This source of revenue will eventually be drastically curtailed, because available monies are needed for other social orders, such as Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security. This may conflict with the open-door policy of the community college because, in the future, it may be difficult to continue to admit all students (Katsinas, 1994). If this outcome occurs, the open-door mission philosophy of the community college system will be severely threatened.

IV. SUGGESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

The negative outcomes that have been examined are unexpected results of the community college philosophy of open-enrollment. However, this does not mean that the concept of open-enrollment should be abolished. The concept of the community college is one that is consistent with Horatio Alger's philosophy that everyone should be given the chance to succeed by working hard. This opportunity to succeed should always be present in American society.

This is not to say that the community college system should ignore its existing problems. The following are some remedies that are designed to improve the existing community college system.

First, there should be more meaningful communication between secondary schools and community colleges. This goal can be accomplished by having community college representatives speak to high school students about the programs that their college offers. In addition, joint observations both of high school classes by community college instructors and of community college classes by high school teachers and administrators would help these people "bridge the gap" between high school educational outcomes and community college scholastic requirements. This meaningful interaction between the two academic genres will result in an appropriate division of school responsibility

toward students (Rouche and Rouche, 1993).

Community colleges also should seek other sources of revenue so that the extended orientation courses can be adequately funded. This goal can be accomplished by the continued use of revenue-generating sources that are prevalent in four-year colleges and universities. Extra effort and emphasis on seeking private grants, on securing alumni contributions and on soliciting commercial donations are but a few ways that community colleges can raise the funds needed for the vital orientation courses (Danko, 1991).

Finally, community colleges can overcome many of the pitfalls that result due to the open-enrollment policy by adopting the following three practices. First, enrichment-learning courses should continue to be offered, but not to matriculated students. By doing this, matriculated students would have to concentrate on academic courses during their community college tenure, strengthening their foundation for transfer to four-year schools. Enrichment courses should be continued to be offered to the non-matriculating public, truly giving meaning to the term "community" college (Roueche and Snow, 1977). By practicing this concept, the institution will continue to serve the community at large.

Secondly, it may be wise for community colleges to continue to offer learning-skills courses, but the schools should augment these courses by utilizing individual

guidance and by utilizing group guidance (Fralick, 1993). These learning-skills courses can be designed to follow a one semester or a one year course of study. By following this method, many degree programs will be extended to three years, but the students have a better chance of attaining a complete education.

Finally, it is important that, after the successful completion of these learning-skills courses, the academic courses offered by the community colleges are of the same standards as those of four-year colleges (Diaz, 1992). A year of remedial work may be necessary for some students to attempt these courses, but it will be time well-spent. If community college courses are of the same difficulty as four year-college courses, the chances of "transfer shock" will be greatly diminished.

After examining the concept and the pitfalls that often result in community college settings, it would be very interesting to discern how community college instructors, administrators, and students perceive the academic situation of their individual community college. Therefore, a research question that can be generated from this paper is:

> WHAT ARE THE PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE INSTRUCTORS, PROFESSORS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND STUDENTS ABOUT THE ACADEMIC QUALITY OF THEIR SCHOOL?

This study could be executed by conducting a survey concerning the subjects' perceptions toward their academic institutions. It would be interesting to compare the

pitfalls and suggestions outlined in this paper with those who spend their daily lives in a community college setting.

It is very important that all interested students are given a chance to succeed in post-secondary education. Therefore, it is vital that the institution of the community college continue to exist. The suggestions outlined in this paper will enable the community college system not only to exist, but to thrive.

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